

## FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to an installation for spraying coating product and to a process for cleaning such an installation.

## BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

5 EP-A-0 274 322, for example, discloses using a tank mounted at the end of the polyarticulated arm of a multi-axis robot for feeding coating products to a sprayer supported by this arm, particularly in the case of an installation for spraying an electrically conducting coating product by means of a sprayer of electrostatic type. In this known installation, it is provided to periodically  
10 connect the tank and the sprayer to a circuit of cleaning product, in order to eliminate any coating product remaining in the tank, in the sprayer and in conduits connecting this tank and this sprayer, at the end of a spraying phase. In effect, it is essential to eliminate any trace of one coating product before introducing a fresh coating product in the tank.

15 In this known installation, the tank must be cleaned before being filled with fresh coating product, which involves immobilizing the robot for a relatively long period, during which it cannot be used for spraying the coating product.

It is a more particular object of the present invention to overcome these  
20 drawbacks by proposing a novel installation which enables the time during which a sprayer is not productive to be reduced.

## SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

To that end, the invention relates to an installation for spraying coating products comprising at least one robot of which a mobile part supports at least  
25 one sprayer and a tank of coating product connected thereto for feeding the sprayer. This installation is characterized in that the robot bears a second tank

adapted to be filled with cleaning product, this second tank being connected in order to feed cleaning product to the tank of coating product, the sprayer and/or the conduits connecting the tank to the sprayer.

Thanks to the invention, the contents of the second tank may be used for  
 5 cleaning the tank of coating product, the sprayer and/or the conduits associated therewith, as soon as a step of spraying coating product has terminated, i.e. before the robot has positioned its sprayer and tank with respect to means located at a fixed station and provided to feed it with coating products. In other words, the time taken by the robot to move from its position of spraying  
 10 towards its position of filling with fresh coating product, may advantageously be used for cleaning the tank of coating product, the sprayer and the conduits associated therewith, from the contents of the second tank.

According to advantageous but non-obligatory aspects of the invention, this installation incorporates one or more of the following characteristics:

15 - The second tank has an internal volume allowing it to contain a sufficient quantity of cleaning product to clean the tank of coating product, the sprayer and/or the conduits associated therewith, at least twice. This aspect of the invention makes it possible to reduce the frequency of filling of the second tank with respect to the frequency of filling of the tank of coating product.

20 - The second tank is mounted on the robot in the vicinity of the tank of coating product.

- First connection means, located at a fixed station in the vicinity of the robot and second connection means mounted on the robot and connected to the second tank are provided, these first and second connection means being  
 25 adapted to establish a connection between a circuit for feed of cleaning product and the second tank. In these cases, the second connection means are

advantageously adapted to be connected to the first connection means when first and second principal connection means, provided respectively at a fixed station and on the robot, are connected for filling the tank of coating product. In addition, the first principal connection means may be provided to comprise  
 5 different connectors, each connected to a circuit for feed of a predetermined coating product, a first connection means for feeding the second tank being arranged in the vicinity of each of these connectors.

- The robot bears a third tank connected to the tank of coating product, to the sprayer and/or to conduits connecting the tank to the sprayer, this third tank  
 10 being adapted to receive at least part of the residues of cleaning of the tank of coating product, the sprayer and/or the conduits mentioned above. This third tank makes it possible temporarily to store the essential of the cleaning residues. This third tank may be provided to be mounted on the robot in the vicinity of the tank of coating product and of the second tank. Means for connecting the  
 15 third tank to a dump circuit are advantageously provided.

- The second tank and possibly the third tank may be piston tanks or tanks with deformable wall.

The invention also relates to a process for cleaning an installation as described hereinabove and, more specifically, a process for cleaning an  
 20 installation for spraying coating products comprising a tank of coating product and a sprayer associated therewith, this tank and/or this sprayer being mounted on a multi-axis robot, characterized in that it comprises a step consisting in feeding the tank, the sprayer and/or the conduits connecting the tank to the sprayer, with cleaning products from a second tank mounted on the robot.

25 According to advantageous aspects of the invention, this process may include one or more of the following characteristics:

- The tank of coating product, the sprayer and/or the conduits are fed with cleaning product from the second tank at the end of a step of spraying coating product, preferably before the tank of coating product is filled again.

5     - The second tank is fed with cleaning product at the same time as the tank of coating product is filled.

10     - The residues of cleaning of the tank of coating product, the sprayer and/or the conduits are at least partly stored temporarily in a third tank mounted on the robot. In that case, a step is advantageously provided, consisting in pouring the contents of the third tank in a dump circuit. Depending on the variants, this step of pouring the contents of the third tank takes place before or after a step of filling the second tank with cleaning product. In a variant, steps may be provided, consisting in alternately connecting the second tank to a circuit for feeding cleaning product and the third tank to the dump circuit, using common connection means provided on the robot.

15     - The step consisting in pouring the contents of the third tank towards the dump circuit and/or the step consisting in filling the second tank take place simultaneously to the filling of the tank with coating product.

- The tank of coating product, the sprayer and the conduits are cleaned by streams of air and cleaning product.

## 20     BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The invention will be more readily understood on reading the following description of four forms of embodiment of an installation in accordance with its principle and of the process for cleaning thereof, given solely by way of example and made with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

25     Figure 1 schematically shows an installation according to the invention for spraying coating product, in the course of being used for spraying a coating

product.

Figure 2 is a view similar to Figure 1 during filling of the tank of coating product used in the installation of Figure 1.

Figure 3 is a view similar to Figure 1 for an installation in accordance  
5 with a second form of embodiment of the invention.

Figure 4 is a view similar to Figure 1 for an installation in accordance with a third form of embodiment of the invention, and

Figure 5 is a view similar to Figure 1 for an installation in accordance with a fourth form of embodiment of the invention.

## 10 DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Referring now to the drawings, and firstly to Figures 1 and 2, the installation according to the invention comprises an automat or robot 1 which is disposed in the vicinity of a conveyor 2 transporting the objects to be coated, in the present case automobile vehicle bodies 3. The robot 1 is of multi-axis type  
15 and comprises a chassis 4 mobile on a guide 5 extending parallel to the direction of conveyance X-X'. An arm 6 is supported by the chassis 4 and comprises a plurality of segments 6a, 6b, 6c, articulated with respect to one another. The chassis 4 is constituted by parts 4a and 4b articulated with respect to each other about a substantially vertical axis Z-Z'.

20 The segment 6c of the arm 6 supports an assembly comprising a tank 7, a sprayer 8 and a plate 9 in which are arranged conduits connecting the tank 7 to the sprayer 8, one of these conduits being shown in Figures 1 and 2 with reference 91.

25 The sprayer 8 is of electrostatic type and is connected to a high-voltage generator (not shown). The product contained in the tank 7 may be a water-soluble paint or a solvent-based paint.

In the configuration of Figure 1, the sprayer 8 is used for spraying coating product, coming from tank 7, onto the body 3.

A second tank 10 is mounted on the robot 1, in the vicinity of the segment 6c and is connected, by conduits (not shown), to the tank 7, to the sprayer 8 and to the plate 9. This tank 10 is provided to be filled with cleaning product, which may be a solvent of the coating product contained in the tank 7. In practice, the nature of the cleaning product is adapted to the type of coating product transiting through the elements 7 to 9.

In a variant, the tank 10 might be mounted on the plate 9 and/or attached to the tank 7.

At the end of spraying of the coating product on the body 3, and before the robot reaches the position of Figure 2 where the tank 7 is filled with coating product again, the contents of the tank 10 may thus be used for cleaning elements 7, 8 and 9.

This cleaning step can take place simultaneously to the displacement of the sprayer 8 from its position of Figure 1 towards its position of Figure 2, i.e. in masked time. To that end, a container 20 for collecting used cleaning product is provided in the booth C, near the foot of the partition 12. This container collects the product having served to clean the terminal part 8a of the sprayer 8 and may be connected to a dump circuit for evacuating the used cleaning product.

The tank 7 is provided on its outer surface with a first connector 71 intended to cooperate with a connector 11 provided at a fixed station on a partition 12 of the spraying booth C in which the robot 1 is installed. The tank 7 is also provided with a second connector 72 intended to cooperate with a second connector 13 disposed in the booth C, in the vicinity of the connector

11.

The connector 11 is connected by a conduit 11<sub>1</sub> to a unit 11<sub>2</sub> for changing coating product which makes it possible to feed the connector 11 with different coating products, depending on the nature of the product to be sprayed on the next body 3 arriving opposite the robot 1.

As for the connector 13, it is connected by a conduit 13<sub>1</sub> to a source 13<sub>2</sub> of cleaning product. The connector 11 is connected to the interior of the tank 7 while the connector 72 is connected to the interior of the tank 10.

In this way, when the tank 7 is presented opposite the connectors 11 and 13, the tank 7 is filled with coating product at the same time as the tank 10 is filled with cleaning product.

According to a variant of the invention (not shown), it is possible to provide for the tank 10 a sufficient capacity to allow two successive cleanings of the tank 7, the sprayer 8 and the plate 9. In that case, the tank 10 is not necessarily filled each time the tank 7 is filled. In a variant, the capacity of the tank 10 may be such as to allow more than two cleanings of elements 7, 8 and 9.

As shown in Figure 3, it is possible to provide a plurality of connectors 11, 11' and 11" of the type of connector 11 and a plurality of connectors 13, 13' and 13" of the type of connector 13 each connected to a source 13<sub>2</sub>, 13'<sub>2</sub> or 13"<sub>2</sub> of cleaning product. This avoids having to resort to a phase of cleaning of the unit for changing the coating products, of the type of unit 11<sub>2</sub> of the first embodiment, when a change of shade is made between two successive bodies 3. The fact that a connector 13, 13' or 13" is provided in the vicinity of each connector 11, 11' or 11" makes it possible to fill the tank 10, as mentioned hereinabove with reference to the first embodiment, independently of the choice of the fresh coating product to be used, i.e. of the choice of the connector 11, 11'

or 11".

In the third embodiment of the invention shown in Figure 4, elements similar to those of the first embodiment bear identical references increased by 100. The robot 101 of this embodiment is disposed opposite a conveyor 102 over which bodies 103 of automobile vehicles advance. The robot 101 comprises a chassis 104 mobile over guide 105 and an arm 106 comprising a plurality of segments 106a, 106b and 106c. A tank 107 is mounted on the arm 106c and is associated with an electrostatic sprayer 108 to which it is connected thanks to a plate 109 in which conduits are arranged, one of which is shown with reference 191.

A second tank 110 is mounted on the robot 101 in the vicinity of the tank 107 and is intended to be filled with cleaning product, like tank 10 of the first embodiment.

A third tank 120 is also mounted on the robot 101 in the vicinity of the tank 107 and is intended to receive the residues of cleaning of the elements 107, 108 and 109, except for those corresponding to the cleaning of the terminal part 108a of the sprayer 108, which may be rejected in the booth, as they are of very small volume. In a variant, a container of the type of container 20 of the first embodiment might be provided.

In practice, the tanks 110 and 120 are adjacent to the plate 109.

As previously, connectors 171 and 172 are provided on the tank 107 in order to cooperate with connectors 111 and 113 provided at a fixed station in the booth C, the connectors 111 and 113 being respectively connected to a unit 111<sub>2</sub> for changing coating product and to a source 113<sub>2</sub> of cleaning product. A third connector 173 is provided on the tank 107 to cooperate with a connector 114 installed at a fixed station on the partition 112 of the booth C and



connected by a conduit 114<sub>1</sub> to a dump 114<sub>2</sub>.

In this way, at the end of a cleaning operation of elements 107, 108 and 109, the tank 107 may be brought opposite the connectors 111, 113 and 114, which makes it possible to fill the tanks 107 and 110 respectively with coating  
 5 product and cleaning product and to empty the tank 120 towards the dump 114<sub>2</sub>.

In the fourth embodiment of the invention shown in Figure 5, elements similar to those of the first embodiment bear identical references increased by 200. The robot 201 of this embodiment is disposed opposite a conveyor 202 over which automobile vehicle bodies 203 transit. This robot 201 comprises a  
 10 chassis 204 mounted on a guide 205 as well as an arm 206 comprising a plurality of segments 206<sub>a</sub>, 206<sub>b</sub> and 206<sub>c</sub>. As previously, a tank 207 is mounted on the segment 206<sub>c</sub> and is associated with an electrostatic sprayer 208 thanks to conduits arranged in a plate 209, one conduit being visible in Figure 5 with reference 291.

15 A tank 210 of cleaning product is provided on the robot 201 in the vicinity of the tank 207, as well as a tank 220 for collecting the residues of cleaning of elements 207 to 209.

Two connectors 271 and 272 are provided on the tank 207 in order to cooperate respectively with connectors 211 and 213 provided at a fixed station  
 20 on the partition 212 of the booth C in which the robot 201 is installed. The connector 211 is connected by a conduit 211<sub>1</sub> to a unit 211<sub>2</sub> for changing coating product. The connector 213 is connected by a conduit 213<sub>1</sub> to a three-way valve 213<sub>2</sub> itself connected by conduits 213<sub>3</sub>, 213<sub>4</sub> to a source 213<sub>5</sub> of cleaning product and to a dump 213<sub>6</sub>.

25 Tanks 210 and 220, which are in practice adjacent the plate 209, may present sufficient capacities to allow them not to be filled or dumped every time

the tank 207 is connected to the connector 211. In this way, the connectors 272 and 213 may be provided to be used alternately in order to place the source 213<sub>5</sub> and the tank 210 in communication, and the tank 220 and the dump 213<sub>6</sub> in communication.

5 In a variant embodiment, the tanks 210 and 220 may be provided to be respectively filled and emptied each time that the tank 207 is connected to the source of coating products, the tank 210 firstly being filled from the source 213<sub>5</sub>, then the three-way valve 213<sub>2</sub> being tipped towards its second position where it allows the contents of the tank 220 to be poured towards the dump 10 213<sub>6</sub>.

In a variant, the pouring of the contents of the tank 220 may be effected before the tank 210 is filled.

Whatever the embodiment considered, it may be provided to clean the tank of coating product, the sprayer and the conduits associated therewith, 15 thanks to these streams of air and cleaning product.

The second tanks 10, 110 and 210 of an installation according to the invention are advantageously piston tanks or tanks with deformable wall, which makes it possible to control the flowrate of the cleaning product towards the cleaning members. In the same way, the third tanks 120 or 220 may likewise be 20 constituted by piston tanks or tanks with deformable wall.

According to constructional variants, the second tanks 10, 110 and 120 are mounted on the robots permanently or removably. The same applies to the third tanks 120 and 220 which may be considered as optional equipment.

The invention has been described with a multi-axis robot. However, it is 25 applicable independently of the exact type of robot, as long as a tank of coating product and a tank of cleaning product are integrated to a mobile part of this

robot. It may be question of a reciprocator of a so-called "roof" machine or a so-called "lateral" machine.